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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are increasingly influenced by state-level policies and dependent upon state financial support, making it a matter of necessity for community college leaders to develop positive liaisons with state public policy makers and law makers. Given the need for positive relations with state officials, community college leaders face a complex of four interrelated problems: (1) limited preparation in the area of inter-leader, inter-level relations in education and professional development; (2) limited information about trends outside their state; (3) a paucity of information about the forces that mold state-level decisions and patterns of policy formation; and (4) lack of knowledge about the theory and practice of effecting change in public policy directions. These handicaps must be overcome if community college leaders are to persuade state-level policy makers to favor greater institutional autonomy or if they are to assure that state-level policies are formulated to serve the colleges' best interests. (RO)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES: HOW TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE LIAISON WITH STATE LAWMAKERS

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

JC 860 271

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Community colleges across the country are increasingly influenced by public policies set at the state level. There is strong evidence also that they are becoming increasingly dependent upon the states for financial support of operations and capital needs. But, despite these facts, there is surprisingly little attention being given to the matter of a necessary and positive liaison with state public policy makers, especially law makers.

At first mention, this may not appear to be a problem to presidents, members of boards of trustees, and others in positions of high responsibility at community colleges, because these individuals see themselves in their own operational setting. In that framework they see themselves often to be highly engaged in actions involving state public policy makers and intended either directly or indirectly to influence the direction in which public policy affecting their institution will move. The perception in general is an accurate one, but this observation does not invalidate the earlier statement of the problem that community colleges face; it just makes it easier not to recognize that the problem exists. The problem is not that leaders of community colleges are unaware of the need for and desirability of establishing a positive liaison with makers of state policies; neither is it one of their limiting commitment of time and energy, both personal and institutional, to the task.

Given the need for a positive liaison with state officialdom, the problem community college leaders face is a complex of four interrelated elements. One is the limited preparation that community college leaders typically bring

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to the task, a second is the limited information about public policy trends outside their own state, a third is the paucity of information about the forces that mold state-level policy decisions, and the fourth is the lack of knowledge about the theory and practice of effecting change in public policy directions. These observations are not made as criticisms of community college leaders, but simply as statements of general fact which, when taken together, constitute a handicap to effective leadership in the field and call for action to resolve it.

All of the key claims made in the foregoing paragraph are substantiated in the results of broad-based studies of trends in the policy direction of community colleges, their bases of financial support, and the career paths of persons reaching positions of high responsibility in these institutions.

Studies Show Growing State Policy Influence

State policy is growing in influence, while the influence of federal and local policy is decreasing. A recent national conference of educators, governors, and staff members from state executive and higher education offices placed primary emphasis on the waning influence of the federal government in higher education policy making and on the waxing role of the state. Concern about the declining ability of community colleges to retain a commitment to local control and to match that commitment with comprehensive educational services for the local community is evident in the pronouncements of leaders in the field. The concern is shown to be valid when it is seen again as a major theme in the research and scholarly literature, such as the annual surveys of state legislation conducted by Martorana (1981, 1982, 1983, 1984) and the periodic surveys of state approaches to community college finance that are conducted by Wattenbarger (1981, 1983, 1985). Conclusions reached in more geographically limited and topically focused studies also build up the concern.

Whether or not community college leaders must accept the predominance of the state voice in policy making is a relevant question. In light of the proven fact that the trend now is clearly toward predominance at that level, however, the need for a positive liaison with state policy makers is indicated regardless of whether the question is answered positively or negatively. If community college leaders wish state policies to be more conducive to local institutional autonomy, they need to persuade the state-level policy makers. If they are ready to accept more state-level direction, they need to find ways to assure that the policies formulated will be in their best interest as much as possible.

Needed Leadership Preparation and Support Mechanisms

Many factors can help explain why community college leaders bring only limited capacities to the task of building a positive liaison with state-level policy leaders. A national study of career paths of top-ranking community college administrators (Moore and others, 1985) shows them coming from a wide range of backgrounds, both in educational preparation and in experience. In

both of these channels for professional development, the data, although not probing the question deeply, give little indication that expertise in "inter-leader, inter-level relations" is a serious objective to be pursued either formally or informally. The fact of the matter is that community college administrators (and, indeed, leaders of higher educational institutions generally) have been encouraged to shun behavior which could be described as "political" even when conducted in non-partisan ways. Having learned how to deal with state-level policy makers in an ad hoc fashion as they came up the ladder of responsibility, community college leaders suffer further from the limited resources upon which they can draw to keep abreast of what is going on in the state policy arena. Available information is weak in that it provides few insights into the forces that shape state policies in postsecondary education and into larger regional and national developments, as opposed to those that apply in a given state.

The aforementioned annual surveys and analyses of state legislation determined several years ago that community colleges are losing their independent voice in dealing with state law makers. It was found that community colleges are affected more by statutory policy directives formulated with all aspects of state government or with all of the public higher education enterprise in mind than by those policies that address community colleges specifically and directly. Whether or not this observation can be related to the structural and administrative organizations of state postsecondary educational agencies is not now known. The conclusion seems at least tentatively to apply both to states that have separate state boards for community colleges (like California, Illinois, and Virginia) and to those in which coordination of community colleges is a function of a board responsible for other sectors (as in the cases of New York, Alabama, and Texas). The question, however, begs more inquiry. More investigation is needed into the way community college policies are created, into who, in fact, are the actors, and into the respective roles they play.

More information should also be available to help community college leaders see state-level public policy in a context larger than the individual states in which they work. At the 1985 annual meeting of the Association of Community College Trustees, the Association and the Illinois Association of Community College Trustees cosponsored an "academy" on state legislation. The nature of the papers and related materials prepared for the handbook that was distributed at the "academy" spoke clearly to the need for more attention to state-level public policy formulation. They also urged a better response to decision makers' needs for a strong base of knowledge about regional and nationwide trends and for a means of keeping up with what is happening in state-level policy as it takes shape each legislative year. Currently, the Council of State Directors of Community and Junior Colleges and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges are examining a proposed joint venture to provide a nationwide reference service on state legislation affecting community colleges and related types of community-based institutions. The service could help produce the positive liaison with state law makers that community college leaders need so much.

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